



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 130

CREATING THE EXCEPTIONAL WORKPLACE -- BUILDING A "STRENGTH-BASED" ORGANIZATION (PART 19)

The Twelve Questions

The value of quality, individualized feedback.

Question 11: "In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress."

The best managers recognize that the time to discuss the progress and growth of employees is an opportunity to help them understand themselves better and to give them a clear perspective on how their contributions are really making a difference to the organization.

We have all had at least one infamous annual or semi-annual job performance review with our supervisor. The first two minutes of the review are usually focused on what the supervisor likes about us and our work, and the remaining 58 minutes are spent on our "areas of opportunity" (the things we are weak at and should improve upon). We usually walk out of this meeting feeling deflated and, while we have a clearer understanding of what we don't do well, we have little understanding of what we do well.

One of the paradoxes of hiring and retaining talented employees is that they tend to lack an intuitive understanding of how their talents manifest themselves in specific behaviors. They need objective feedback as to how they can focus these talents to become more productive -- feedback supervisors can provide. Such supervisors understand that, because talents are innate and natural, it is impossible to not use one's talents. So, instead of trying to change individual employees through centering on their weaknesses, great supervisors feel compelled to help them gain self-understanding and knowledge about the talents they possess and how they are applied every day at work.

Talent never becomes "talented" until an employee has a role that uses that talent. Great managers are always holding up a mirror to employees and encouraging them to "look in the mirror"-- to know themselves well and to know the roles in which they will most likely succeed. The world's greatest managers can answer some basic questions about every one of their employees. Some of these are

What do employees enjoy the most about their current and previous work experiences?

What attracted them to come to work for the organization and what keeps them there?

What are employees' strengths, talents, skills and knowledge?

What are their goals for their current roles?

How often would they like to meet to discuss their progress?

Are they the kind of people who will tell me how they're feeling or will I have to ask?

What are their personal goals or commitments?

What is the best praise and recognition they have ever received?

What have been the most productive relationships they have had with a mentor or manager and what made them so special?

Talent only responds in relationship to another human being. Thus, feedback must be specific to the individual, and must be given in the context of a positive employee-manager relationship. The last words of Question #11 -- "my progress" -- are a significant part of this Item. Employees must walk away from any discussion of their growth with a clearer understanding of who they are, instead of who they are not.

Having the opportunity to learn and grow in one's job is one.

Question 12: "This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow."

The need to learn and grow is a very natural instinct for human beings. Finding more efficient ways to do our jobs is one way we learn and grow. Where there is learning, there is innovation and a breeding ground for a more positive and refreshing perspective toward our perceptions of self and others.

In today's work environment, productivity does not come from working harder; it comes from working "smarter." This is why work environments that reinforce and promote learning are attractive to employees.

We have all worked with people who have stopped learning and growing. They suddenly have all the answers, and become unable or unwilling to see alternative solutions. Their attitude infects both the workplace culture as a whole and their coworkers, individually. It limits the very growth and innovation that creates competitive advantages for today's organizations.

Why do people become unwilling to learn and grow? Because learning and growing involve risk -- the risk of challenging the status quo. Change brings about unfamiliarity, and with unfamiliarity comes insecurity.

Great managers recognize that they face a challenge every day: How do you create a culture that is open to new ideas and allows employees the opportunity to explore possible implications of those ideas without fear of rejection or retribution? Great managers know that, initially, good ideas are not always perfectly thought-out, executable strategies. Good ideas are often abstract, and need discussion so they can be defined and sculpted toward the best possible outcomes. This process takes time and energy; time and energy are limited resources. Nevertheless, the investment of time and energy is imperative to making good ideas useful. For employees, the creation of a culture receptive to new ideas also involves significant belief and trust in their managers and teams.

An organization's future is dependent upon the learning and growth of its individual employees who are close to the action. Great managers, employees and teams are never quite satisfied with current ways of doing things. They always feel a slight tension about finding better, more efficient ways to work.

Next: Where do we go from here?

Regards, FL Ames

Excerpted from: "*First Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently.*" For more information about the research and book, please refer to web site <http://www.gallup.com/poll/managing/grtwrkplc.asp>.

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